

KEEPING IT REAL



MATHEW SUMNER — Staff

SHIRLEY LAMARR, (above) director of San Mateo County's Choices program, meets with two jail inmates (above) and conducts a class (below) at the Maguire Correctional Facility in Redwood City.

From life of crime to Hall of Fame

■ Shirley LaMarr honored for work as director of the county's re-entry program for jail inmates

By Rebekah Gordon
STAFF WRITER

REDWOOD CITY

SHIRLEY LaMarr will be the first to admit that she spent most of her life as the poster child for society's ills, endlessly revolving through the system.

"I was the nightmare problem that most of those people went home thinking, 'Well, what do we do with this woman?'" LaMarr said.

Raised in the projects in Oakland, Vallejo and San Francisco by an abusive and alcoholic mother, LaMarr was gang-raped at 12 and dropped out of school in seventh grade. She was married and pregnant by 15, turned her first trick a year or two later, and had four children by her early 20s.

"It did not take long before I literally gave up and said, 'The hell with it, I'm just going to give into the life of drugs,'" LaMarr said. "And that's what I started doing."

Fifteen years of heroin addiction, prostitution, burglary and robbery, abusive men, and living in residential



hotels and cars followed. She guesses she was arrested 30 times, written off as nothing more than a hooker high on dope.

But tonight, LaMarr, who is now 58 and the director of the county's Choices re-entry program for jail inmates, is about to be written into the San Mateo County Women's Hall of Fame, alongside nine other women and four high school students.

The honor recognizes that she has spent the last 13 years helping thousands of the downtrodden turn their lives away from drugs and violence, as she did.

"The big thing I got from Shirley is that change is possible," said Bushrod Boone, 30, an inmate at the Maguire Correctional Facility and recovering addict awaiting sentencing

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Woman goes from life of crime to County's Hall of Fame

► **FAME**, from Local 1

on drug possession charges. "Hopefully I can get back out and do it the right way."

LaMarr's past — and being forthright about it — helps her to relate to her charges more intuitively. She keeps just enough street talk in her lexicon to make her message resonate all the more.

"She gives it to you raw and uncut," said Joe, a 28-year-old inmate who asked that his last name be withheld. He has been in jail four years facing homicide charges. "What she talks about is real — her kids, her past, her life. It brings tears to your eyes. It hit me home, what she talks about."

When she was 40, LaMarr, faced with prison time for first-degree burglary, was given the option to enter San Francisco's Delancey Street Foundation rehabilitation program instead.

She begrudgingly agreed to enroll, but then stayed for five years and became a model resident.

Shortly after graduating in 1994, LaMarr came to San Mateo County to help Dr. Teri Delane, who had been her mentor at Delancey, launch Choices. Soon a couple of hours a week volunteering turned into a full-time job.

"She's basically dedicated her life to giving back what was given to her," said Delane, who is now the principal of Life Learning Academy, a charter school on Angel Island. "That's the whole concept of Delancey Street."

Choices is modeled after Delancey Street, requiring inmates to be responsible for their community in the jail. Veterans orient rookies, and all hold each other accountable to the rules of not lying, cheating or stealing. They attend meetings, study for

San Mateo County Women's Hall of Fame 2007 inductees

Elizabeth "Betty" Carlson, office manager and caseworker, U.S. Rep. Tom Lantos

May Gee, Pacifica founder; retired sergeant, U.S. Women's Army Corps

Judith Heyboer, retired senior vice president of human resources, Genentech

Jennifer Horne, founder, Legal Aid Society's Teen Parents Project

Rosalyn "Roz" Koo, board vice chair, Self-Help for the Elderly

Shirley LaMarr, director,

Choices re-entry program
Barbara Liedtke, South County coordinator, HIP Housing
Georgi LaBerge, former mayor of Redwood City

Karen Philip, superintendent, Millbrae School District
Georgette Sarles, president, Daly City-Colma Chamber of Commerce

The Hall of Fame's Young Women of Excellence 2007 inductees:

Lizeth Chavez, Sequoia High School senior

Kristin Costello, Terra Nova High School senior

Tiffany Ling Ho, Westmoor High School senior

Jasmine Nachtigall, Hillsdale High School junior

their GED, eat their meals together and make crafts for their restitution, such as cards for soldiers in Iraq.

Delane, LaMarr and counselor Viola Smith — who was a resident at Delancey Street alongside LaMarr — started Choices in the Women's Correctional Center with just a handful of inmates. The program expanded to the men's jail in 1997. Today, there are 26 women and 192 men enrolled in any given time.

LaMarr, who said she is in total awe over the award, is quick to deflect praise to her colleagues and the Sheriff's Office.

But there is an energy about her that any inmate will attest makes her individual impact profound. She is apt to use her bellowing voice to yell at inmates, but they listen. She is the self-described Choices matriarch — a proverbial Wendy to the county's own Lost Boys.

"She's like a real mother to me," said Juan Carlos, a 30-

year-old prisoner and former Sureno gang member who also asked that his last name be withheld. "Her presence makes you feel that everything is going to be OK."

Juan Carlos, who has been in Choices for five months and faces two counts of attempted murder, said LaMarr imparts many of the basic life lessons that no adult ever gave him.

"She's teaching me how to care for my family," Juan Carlos said. "She's molding me into a right man."

The toughest aspect of LaMarr's job is knowing that, for reformed inmates like Juan Carlos who are facing serious criminal charges, the county jail is not their last stop.

"The hardest part is to see a guy transform completely — and you know that's what's he done, you just know it with everything in you — and to see him have to go to prison for 20 years or more," LaMarr said, fighting back tears. Many products of Choices write her from prison

regularly.

Some, she said "write letters to men here, to tell them to be good and to do what Miss Shirley and the counselors tell you to do, because it's real. That's the hardest part."

LaMarr's impact extends beyond the corrections community, as it was Leesa Maree Bleicher, a drug and alcohol counselor at Sitike Counseling Center in South San Francisco, who nominated LaMarr for induction to the Hall of Fame.

Bleicher considers LaMarr her mentor and inspiration. In her counseling work, she said she's met more than a dozen people who point to LaMarr as the person who single-handedly turned them around.

"You could see the effect, it left an imprint on them," Bleicher said. "A smile would come to their face, 'Yeah, I remember her, she saved my life.'"

Bleicher said LaMarr is no nine-to-fiver, either; she'll stay until midnight if that's what is needed. Though she is moving to Redwood City, for the last two and a half years she has commuted more than two hours each way from Stockton.

"This has never been about a job for me," LaMarr said. "This is my life, what I do, and it's what I intend to do. And it makes me, by largely, very happy."

But LaMarr's other passion is undoubtedly food — her arms flail as she waxes on about lobster, crab and shrimp. She is also committed to helping her four children — who now range in age from 36 to 42 — and her 12 grandchildren understand the sober version of her.

But otherwise, she is wholly focused, she said, on Choices. The responsibility to do good forces her to stay on the right path, a basic tenet of Delancey

Street.

"I have a whole county that looks to me and depends on me to do what I do. I have 192 male inmates, 26 women inmates. I have people like you, who, no other time in my life would have ever even looked at me, other than to write me down as a fatality," LaMarr said. "There's

nothing I would trade that for. There ain't no dope, or nothing out there good enough for me to trade that for."

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